NODIER'S FANTASTICISM

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FRENCH Romanticism is indebted to its schoolmaster for its fantastic element. The group of young men who gathered around Charles Nodier (1780-1844) Sunday evenings in his salon at the Arsenal (1824-7) to carry out under his leadership the literary revolution called Romanticism followed their host to his holding in the country of fantasy.[1] This writer fathered the Fantastic in French fiction. Nodier was a fanatic *fantaisiste*. He was obsessed with the phantasmagoric world. Reality was to him, as to Hoffmann, but a pretext for the flight of his imagination. This cultivated and learned man of letters, this editor and librarian, this bibliographer and lexicographer, this grammarian and historian, this botanist and entomologist, this traveler and man of affairs lived in a world of dreams. Nodier had a very complex character. He was at once sceptical and superstitious, heretic and mystic, revolutionary and royalist. This investigator and innovator felt an affinity for the frantic and fantastic.[2] He had an infatuation for the accidental and exceptional, for the fabulous and monstrous, for the mysterious and miraculous. Our writer was passionately fond of fairy-tales and ghost-stories, of Eastern legends and Western myths. As a boy he read fantastic stories with such relish that he was willing, as he tells us himself, to give ten years of his life for the Fantastic.

Nodier's first novel, *le Peintre de Saltzbourg* (1803), already showed its author's preoccupation with the supernatural and supra-sensual. His introduction to Taylor's collection of prints, *les Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France* (1820ff.), expressed the enthusiasm for national antiquities to which Nodier gradually rose. This marked the beginning of our writer's patriotic piety for the historic past of his country. His patriotism found a very beautiful expression in his story, *la Neuvaine de la chandeleur*

[1] Cf. M. Schenk, *la Part de Charles Nodier dans la formation des idées romantiques de V. Hugo jusqu'à la Préface de Cromwell* (1914), p. 104.

[2] Cf. Michel Salomon, *Charles Nodier et le groupe romantique d'après des documents inédits* (1908), p. 276.

(1839). Nodier may with right be considered the pioneer of French folk-lorists. He was an untiring collector of medieval legends and popular beliefs. Nodier may be credited, together with Chateaubriand, with the restoration of medievalism in modern arts and letters. His essay, *Du fantastic en littérature* (1830), is an apotheosis of the Middle Ages, which he calls the Golden Age of the Fantastic.

In this essay, our writer sketches the progress of the Fantastic through the ages. According to his point of view, it is the fantastic element which has been at all times the highest inspiration of the poet. Nodier fully realizes the difficulty of restoring this element in the literature of a period which has long ago abandoned its belief in the Supernatural. As a necessary condition for the resurrection of the Fantastic in the literature of his sceptical contemporaries, he therefore demands a suspension of disbelief on the part of both the writer and the reader. In order to obtain the reader's momentary suspension of incredulity, the writer must tell his story in such a way as not to arouse any doubt as to his own belief in its truth.

Nodier was *naïf* enough to think that he could reawaken in modern times the medieval faith in the marvellous and miraculous. Nevertheless, this *merveilleux naïf* was a step further than Chateaubriand's *merveilleux chrétien* toward the resurrection of the Supernatural in modern arts and letters. In contrast to Chateaubriand, our writer fully understood that the Supernatural was not merely material for stylistic embellishment. The aim of the supernatural element in art was to call forth in the reader that sort of emotion which could not be imparted by the world of realities.

Nodier's fantasticism may be defined as *le merveilleux germanique et celtique*. It comprises the lives of the saints, medieval traditions, popular superstitions, Germanic myths and Celtic legends. It embraces all the inhabitants of the extra-human realm: angels and saints, demons and ghosts, dragons and dwarfs, fairies and elves, sylphs and salamanders, goblins and griffins, vampires and valkyrs. Nodier himself, with his kind heart, delighted mostly in elfland and fairyland. Our author loved especially to tell stories of benevolent spirits but his appeal to the popular belief in angels and saints could easily be extended to the malevolent spirits. This is just what has happened, and diabolism has become an integral part of Nodier's fantasticism. As a matter of fact, the temptations of the devils surpass in number the interventions of the saints. Diabolical legends will be found even in the works of Nodier himself. A few of his stories deal with apparitions, sorcerers and devils.

Nodier's *Tablettes romantiques* (1823) contain the legend of Mont Saint-Michel. This mountain on the Norman coast is the eternal monument to the victorious leader of the hosts of Heaven in the war against the rebel angel. In his *Légendes populaires de la France*, collected and published in 1842, our writer included the legend, "le Château de Robert le Diable."[3] Now Robert the Devil, the son of a duke and duchess of Normandy, was born, according to the confession of his mother, in answer to prayers addressed to the Devil. In another version of the story, the devil himself was Robert's father. However, when Robert learned of his diabolical descent, he turned from his father to God. During his courageous defense of Rome against the besieging Saracens, an angel bestowed upon our penitent celestial weapons with which he was given power to rout his enemies. Richard sans Peur, about whom this book also contains a legend, was another son of Satan. He, too, joined the cause of the good God upon learning of his infernal origin.

Nodier was among the contributors to *le Tiroir du Diable* (c. 1842) and *le Diable à Paris* (1845-6), collections of *tableaux parisiennes*. Our writer is also credited with the story, *le Violon du Diable* (1849), but its authorship is very doubtful. His *Infernalia* (1822) is wholly a diabolical book, as the title well implies. It contains anecdotes, brief novels, novelettes and short stories on ghosts, specters, demons and vampires.[4]

Nodier repeatedly occupied himself with vampirism. The belief that a departed spirit returns to earth to feed on the blood of the living is very current among the Slavonic peoples. The word "vampire" itself is of Russian origin.[5] In 1820 Nodier published a novel,

[3] The story first appeared in *la Foudre* for the year 1821. On the legend of Robert the Devil see Edelstand Du Méril, "De lalégende de Robert-le-Diable," in *Revue contemporaine*, t. XIV (1854), pp. 25-61 (also in *Etudes sur quelques points d'archéologie et d'histoire littéraire*, Paris, 1862); Karl Borinski, "Eine ältere deutsche Bearbeitung von Robert le Diable," in *Germania*, Bd. XXXVII (1892) and "Zur Legende von Robert dem Teufel," in *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*, Bd. XIX (1899), S. 77-87; E. Benezé, *Orendel, Wilhelm von Orense und Robert der Teufel*, Halle, 1897; H. Tardel, *Die Sage von Robert der Teufel in neueren deutschen Dichtungen und in Meyerbeers Oper.*, Berlin, 1900.

[4] Nodier's authorship of this book is very doubtful. It is not listed in the bibliography of this writer, as it appears in the *Bulletin du Bibliophile* for 1844, pp. 809-29. *Infernalia* has not been within the reach of the present writer.

[5] On vampirism the reader is referred to the following books: Wilhelm Mannhardt, "Ueber Vampirism," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Mythologie*, Bd. IV (1857); Dudley Wright, *Vampires and Vampirism*, London, 1914; Stefan Hoch, *Die Vampyrensagen und ihre Verwertung in deutscher Literaturgeschichte*, Berlin, 1900.

Lord Ruthwen, ou les Vampires, and a melodrama, *le Vampire*, which is an adaptation of the novel.[6]

Vampirism also forms the subject of *Smarra, ou les démons de la nuit*, published the following year, the most admired and the most characteristic of Nodier's stories. This tale of Thessalonian superstition, written in the manner of the sorceries and diableries of the *Golden Ass* of Apuleius, swarms with demons of all sorts. The night, according to the belief of the early Christian poets, is full of demons. Smarra, a ghoul, who drinks men's blood, is the familiar spirit of a witch, who delights in filching men's hearts. On their nocturnal revels, the evil spirit and his mistress are accompanied by a thousand demons of the night: "stunted women with a drunken look in their eyes; red and violet serpents with fire-spitting mouths; lizards, who, from out of a lake of mud and blood show faces similar to those of living human beings; heads recently detached from the trunk by the soldier's axe but fixing their eyes upon me and running away skipping on reptilian feet."

Nodier aimed at a reconciliation of Classicism with Romanticism in *Smarra*, as may be seen from the famous verse by Chénier, which our writer placed as a motto at the head of the story. He also wished to pour new wine in old bottles. But in this book a new influence is already making itself felt. Nodier has now fallen under the fatal fascination of Germany. In his essay, *Du fantastic en littérature*, our writer hails Germany as the last retreat of the fantastic element in modern times. "Germany," he asserts, "is richer in this form of creations than any other country in the world." It is in his opinion "the favorite domain of the Fantastic." Nodier is chiefly responsible for the advent of Germanism in French Romanticism.[7] He acquired

[6] Nodier's authorship of the novel, which is an adaptation of Byron's story, is doubtful. The son of our author protested to the publisher for putting his father's name on the title-page and maintained that his father had brought out the novel without writing it.

[7] For a discussion of the German influence on French Romanticism, cf. E. Falconet, "De l'influence de la littérature allemande sur la littérature française," *Revue du Midi*, t. VI (1834); H. Leuthold, "Einfluss der deutschen Literatur auf die neuere französische Lyrik," *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 14-15 October, 1859; J. Breitinger, *Die Vermittler des deutschen Geistes in Frankreich*, Zürich, 1876; Stephan Born, *Die romantische Schule in Deutschland und in Frankreich, Heidelberg*, 1879 (= *Sammlung von Vorträgen*, II, 4, S. 97-124); O. Weddigen, *Geschichte der Einwirkungen der deutschen Literatur auf die Literaturen der übrigen europäischen Kulturvölker*, Leipzig, 1882; Raoul Rosières, "la littérature allemande en France de 1750 à 1880," *Revue politique et littéraire*, 3 série, 3e année (1883), No. 11, pp. 328-34 (also in *Recherches sur la poésie contemporaine*, Paris, 1896); Th. Süpfle, *Geschichte des deutschen Kultureinflusses auf Frankreich*, Gotta, 1886-90; F. Meissner, *Der Einfluss des deutschen Geistes auf die französische Literatur des* 19 *Jahrhunderts bis* 1870, Leipzig, 1893; Virgile Rossel, *Histoire des relations littéraires entre la France et*

his admiration for Germany through his personal contact with Mme. de Staël. German folk-lore and legend appealed strongly to our writer's fantastic spirit. Fantastic supernaturalism was the main characteristic of Romanticism in Germany; and it is from this country that it was imported into France. But it did not long remain a foreign importation. We must always bear in mind that whatever was introduced in France from abroad during the Romantic period received the national imprint of that country.

Nodier was especially attracted to a kindred spirit among the Romantic writers of Germany, Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann (1776-1822). Our writer was a fervent admirer of this genial German author whom he resembled in his expression of fantastic revery, psychologic mystery, and eery enchantment. Hoffmann, more than any other German author, had fervent followers and devoted disciples in France. His influence on French Romanticism far exceeded even that of Goethe. Hoffmann had a special attraction for the French Romantics. He obtained the admiration of such men as Balzac, Gautier, Nerval and Musset. His stories were repeatedly rendered into French during the second quarter of the past century[8] and greatly affected the fiction of that period. It is no exaggeration to say that Hoffmann directed French Romanticism during the thirties.[9] To get an idea of the effects produced by this German

l'Allemagne, Paris, 1897; Joseph Texte, "Influence allemande dans le romantisme français," *Revue des deux mondes,* t. CCCLVI (1897), pp. 607-33 (also in *Etudes de littérature européenne,* Paris, 1898) and "les Origines de l'influence allemande dans la littérature française du XIXe siècle," in *Revue de l'histoire littéraire de France,* t. V (1898), pp. 1-53; Marcellin Pradels, *le Romantisme français et le romantisme allemand,* Biarritz, 1907; Auguste Dupouy, *France et Allemagne,* Paris, 1913; L. Reynaud, *l'Influence allemande en France au XVIIIe et au XIXe siècle,* Paris, 1922.

[8] Translations of Hoffmann appeared in France by Delatouche (1823), Caben (1829), Loève-Veimars (1829-37), Toussenel (1830), Egmont (1834), Christian (1842), Marmier (1843), Champfleury (1856), and La Bedollière (1861). A complete list of French translations of Hoffmann's tales will be found in Antoine Laporte's *Bibliographie contemporaine,* t. VII (1890).

[9] An excellent study on Hoffmann's influence in France has been written by Marcel Breuillac, "Hoffmann en France. Etude de littérature comparée," in *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France,* t. XIII (1906), pp. 427-57 and t. XIV (1907), pp. 74-105. See also Gustave Thurau, "E. T. A. Hoffmann's Erzählungen in Frankreich," in *Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstage Oskar Schades* (Königsberg, 1896) and "Ein deutscher Fantastiker in Frankreich" in *Europa* for the year 1874, S. 522-3. J. H. Retinger, in his Paris dissertation, *le Conte phantastique dans le Romantisme* (1908), also stresses Hoffmann's influence on the French Romantic School. But in influencing the literature of France, Hoffmann was but repaying his debt to that country. He himself owed much to Jacques Cazotte's *le Diable amoureux* (1772); cf. Georg Ellinger, *E. Th. A. Hoffmann* (1894), p. 36; Louis P. Betz, *Studien z. vgl. Literaturgeschichte d. neueren Zeit* (1902), S. 38; *Revue d'histoire litt. de la France,* t. XIII (1906), p. 451; Dupouy, *France et Allemagne* (1913), p. 101, H. Matthey, *Essai sur le merveilleux dans la littérature française* (1915), p. 245 note. On the Super-

writer on the Romantic School in France, it suffices to read Jules Janin's preface to his *Contes fantastiques et contes littéraires* (1832) or Gautier's preface to Marmier's translation of Hoffmann (1843). The French Romantics called him "the most original, the most passionate, but the most bizarre genius of our epoch." Bizarre, indeed, he was, this Hoffmann, this architect, engraver, painter, musician, actor and novelist, who turned night into day, consumed an enormous quantity of tobacco and alcohol and composed some of the strangest stories to be found in the literature of the world. He was considered by his contemporaries as a descendant of the Devil and is known to this day as "Devil-Hoffmann." Through this German writer, Romanticism sold itself to Satan in other countries as well as in his own. Hoffmann held a firm belief in Beelzebub. "The Devil," he would often say, "will put his hoof into everything, how good soever it is in the outset." He so feared the fiend that he would often awaken his wife in the night and ask her to keep watch with him. This influence of Hoffmann on our author, already evident in *Smarra,* becomes much greater in his later works.

Goethe was next to Hoffmann the German writer who most deeply affected the writings of Nodier. It is beyond our scope to show in this paper the influence of *Werther* on *le Peintre de Saltzbourg.* What concerns us in this connection is the effect produced by *Faust* on our writer. This poem, especially in its diabolical aspect, strongly influenced French imagination.[10] Nodier also admired *Faust,* and prepared in 1828, in collaboration with Antony Béraud, a prose adaptation of the poem for the stage. In his essay, *Des types en littérature* (1830), he mentions Faust and Mephistopheles among the admirable characters in literature.

L'AMOUR ET LE GRIMOIRE (1832)

This story, originally called *le Nouveau Faust et la Nouvelle Marguerite, ou Comment je me suis donné au Diable,* is a burlesque of *Faust.* In it, Nodier brings down Goethe's lofty poem to the level of a very ordinary bourgeois affair. It is a pseudo-supernatural story and belongs to what is generally called explained Supernatural-

natural in Hoffmann's writings the reader is referred to J. Havemann's essay, "Das Wunderbare in E. Th. A. Hoffmanns Dichtungen" in *Deutsche Heimat, Blätter f. Litteratur und Volkstum,* 6 Jg. (1903), I. Tl. Heft 3 S. 65-74, to Margis's aritcle on our writer in *Zeitschrift f. angewandte Psychologie* for the year 1911, and to Olga Raydt's dissertation, *Das Dämonische als Stilform in den lit. Werken E. Th. A. Hoffmanns* (1912).

[10]On Goethe's influence in France, cf. F. Baldensperger, *Goethe en France: étude de littérature comparée* (Paris, 1904, 2e éd., 1920).

ism. This type of the Supernatural was the main characteristic of the English Gothic Novel at the end of the eighteenth century.

Maxime, who tells the story in the first person, summons Satan and offers his soul to the Devil on condition that the latter bring to his room at midnight a certain Marguerite to whom the young man has taken a passing fancy. Satan, however, turns a deaf ear and refuses to submit to the beck and call of a mere school-boy who has by chance gotten hold of a grimoire (book of conjurations). By a curious coincidence, the girl appears in his room without the aid of the Devil. A friend of our young man, who has succeeded in persuading Marguerite to elope with him, has sent her up to the room of her would-be seducer there to await in hiding the morning mail-coach. Maxime's anxiety not to betray a trusting friend shows that he is too good a man to sell his soul to Satan.

LE COMBE DE L'HOMME MORT (1840)

In this story, based on a sixteenth century legend of a bargain with Beelzebub, Goethe's influence is less significant. On the eve of All Saint's Day in the year fifteen hundred and sixty-one, the Devil seized a man riding along the road and bore him off thirty leagues to a narrow valley in the Jura mountains. This man had murdered an old hermit in order to obtain his wealth, after having won his confidence through hypocritical piety, and when trapped by the villagers and threatened with death, he sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for a thirty years' respite. The contract was written in Satan's scrawl on a slip of paper stained with blood and marked with five big black finger nails like a royal seal.

The man was as eager for knowledge as for wealth. After having escaped punishment through the aid of the Devil, he studied at the Universities of Metz and Strasbourg, sat at the feet of the famous sorcerer Cornelius and obtained his doctorate in four faculties. His reputation as a scholar spread far and wide and he was called to fill a chair at the University of Heidelberg. Men and women came from the four corners of the continent to study under this professor. Satan himself, attracted by this scholar's reputation, enrolled as one of his students. Our professor soon was elected rector of the celebrated university. He possessed fame and fortune and never thought of his pact with the Devil. But Satan has a better memory than even the rector of the University of Heidelberg. At the expiration of the term, the Devil was at hand to claim fulfill-

ment of the terms of the contract. As the rector rode along the highway, pleased with himself and the world, the Devil appeared, snatched him up and brought him to the spot of the murder. When the rector ascertained his whereabouts, he was assailed by unpleasant memories. An old woman, urged on by the Evil One, helped along the poor professor's memory by a full and detailed recital of the events which had occurred thirty years before and which gave the valley its name—the Valley of the Dead Man. As he finally rushed out, anxious to disappear in the dark of the night, the Devil followed him and wrung his neck.

The Devil cannot kill a man unless the latter has entered into a pact with him and has forsworn God, as may be inferred from the counsel given to Job by his well-meaning wife. The Devil has no interest in a man's body. If he kills a man, it is only to obtain his soul. "When the term [of a devil-pact] is over," Victor Hugo tells us in *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), "the Devil destroys the body in taking the soul, just as a monkey cracks the shell to eat the nut."

The conception of Satan as a university student is reminiscent of Wilhelm Hauff's *Mémoirs des Satan* (1828).[11]

The Devil retains in this story some elements of his former avatar as a hearth spirit. He is described as small of stature, with thick locks of flaming red hair, which almost cover his face, a face pale and yellow like the wax of an old candle and furrowed by wrinkled lines, little red eyes, more sparkling than red-hot coals, a huge mouth with innumerable teeth as pointed as pins and as white as ivory, and with hands long and lean, so transparent that the flame, over which he warms them, shines through them as if they were of horn. The Devil is dressed in a doublet and breeches of scarlet red and wears on the top of his head a woolen cap of the same color. It is this conventional costume that our Devil has in common with Goethe's Mephistopheles.

[11] One of the most interesting episodes of this book has been included, in an English translation, in the present writer's *Devil Stories* (New York, 1921).